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Action Learning of Online Marketing via a Global Contest

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1. Introduction

The Google Online Marketing Challenge is a global competition in which student teams run advertising campaigns for small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) using AdWords, Google's text-based advertisements. In 2008, its inaugural year, over 8,000 students and 300 instructors from 47 countries representing over 200 schools participated. The Challenge ran in undergraduate and graduate classes in disciplines such as marketing, tourism, advertising, communication and information systems. Combining advertising and education, the Challenge gives student hands-on experience in the increasingly important field of online marketing, engages them with local businesses and motivates them through the thrill of a global competition.

Student teams receive US\$200 in AdWords credits, Google's premier advertising product that offers cost-per-click advertisements. The teams then recruit and work with a local business to devise an effective online marketing campaign. Students first outline a strategy, run a series of campaigns, and provide their business with recommendations to improve their online marketing.

Teams submit two written reports for judging by 14 academics in eight countries. In addition, Google AdWords experts judge teams on their campaign statistics such as success metrics and account management. Rather than a marketing simulation against a computer or hypothetical marketing plans for hypothetical businesses, the Challenges has student teams develop and manage real online advertising campaigns for their clients and compete against peers globally.

The Challenge promotes Action Learning – learning by doing and subsequently reflecting on one's experiences – by offering tailored support materials and evaluation guidelines. In the second written report, students critically reflect on their advertising campaign results and learning outcomes. Students also receive feedback from their professors, SMEs and Google.

2. Goal

The Challenge goal is to give students an interesting, effective and pedagogically sound real-world task to help prepare them for work in marketing. To accomplish this goal, and to position the Challenge as an academic exercise, students should master the following Learning Objectives based on participating in the Challenge:

- Given the opportunity, choose to discuss online marketing and media planning.
- Using examples, share the learning experience of group work and business consulting.
- Using examples, explain the following terms: banner advertisement, click-through-rate, conversion, landing page, optimization techniques, ROI and text advertisements.
- Using examples, contrast mass advertising and context-sensitive advertising.
- Using examples, contrast the advantages and disadvantages of three online advertising payment models: pay-per-click, cost per thousand impressions (CPM) and affiliate

- Using examples, illustrate technical and cultural factors affecting the success of online advertising campaigns.
- Using examples, illustrate the difficulties of developing a web-based marketing campaign that will stand out among the billions of web pages available.

3. Procedure

After registering their class for the Challenge (www.google.com/onlinechallenge), instructors get support materials for themselves and the student teams. The recommended team size is between four and six students (three and five in 2009). Subsequently, either the instructors or team members choose a small to medium-sized business. After an initial meeting with the SME to investigate its market and goals, the teams create ads, appropriate keywords – the words used in online searching – and a provisional 21 day advertising campaign. At least one week prior to the campaign, teams submit a two-page (four pages in 2009) Pre-Campaign Strategy. During the campaign they implement their strategy, review their results and adjust as necessary. Teams must submit a ten-page (eight pages in 2009) Post-Campaign Summary within three weeks of the campaign's end.

4. Student Evaluation

Evaluating the Challenge incorporates written pre-campaign strategy and post-campaign summary reports, and campaign statistics computed by Google. In the pre-campaign strategy, student teams briefly overview the client, client's marketing efforts and client's industry as well as a proposed online advertising strategy with target audience settings, keyword examples, proposed advertising copy and projected success metrics. The post-campaign summary contains an industry component and learning component, integrated with tables, figures and charts. The Industry component begins with a short executive summary and then covers the campaign overview, key results, conclusions and recommendations for the client's future online marketing. In the Learning component student teams reflect on their perceived learning success by discussing learning objectives and outcomes, group dynamics, client dynamics and the evolution of their campaign.

The computed component of the assessment is a proprietary Google algorithm that examines over 30 factors within a campaign account that include impressions, cost-per-click, click-through-rates, keyword choices, ad copy creative and budgeting. Results from the campaign statistics determine the top fifty teams in each region (Americas, Europe and Asia-Pacific). Next, Google AdWords experts judge the campaign accounts qualitatively and trim the remaining teams to 15, or five per region. An independent panel of over a dozen academics from eight countries then chooses regional and global winners based solely on the pre-campaign strategy and the post-campaign summary reports described above. Two panelists with teams in the final 15 abstained from all judging.

5. Evidence of Effectiveness

After the Challenge all participating groups filled out a comprehensive survey on their satisfaction and experiences with the contest. As Table 1 shows, the Challenge was effective for both instructors and students. Ninety four (90) percent of the instructors (students) agreed (the sum of 'Strongly Agree', 'Agree' and 'Mildly Agree') that the Challenge improved students' abilities to select appropriate keywords for a marketing campaign. The survey results showed comparable agreement on students' abilities to discuss online marketing (93%, 89%), gain insights related to working with clients (91%, 86%), explain online marketing terms (95%, 90%), and appreciate the difficulties of developing an outstanding online marketing campaign (95%, 90%).

Table 1: Evaluation of Students' Learning Success (Instructors n = 135, Students n= 685)

Participating in the Challenge ...		Strongly Agree	Agree	Mildly agree	Neutral	Mildly disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Does not apply
... improved my students' (my) ability to select appropriate keywords	I	33	49	12	4	1	1	0	1
	S	31	39	20	6	2	1	0	1
... improved my students' (my) ability to discuss online marketing	I	28	48	16	4	2	1	1	1
	S	28	41	20	7	2	1	1	1
... gave my students (me) insights related to the problems of working with "real" business clients	I	37	40	14	4	2	1	1	1
	S	25	42	20	7	3	2	0	1
... improved my students' (my) understanding of online marketing terms	I	44	40	10	3	1	1	1	1
	S	37	38	16	6	2	1	0	1
... illustrated to my students (me) how technical or cultural factors affect the success of online advertising campaigns	I	17	31	27	10	7	7	1	1
	S	22	34	23	13	5	2	1	1
... illustrated to my students (me) the difficulties of developing a web-based marketing campaign that will stand out among the billions of web pages available	I	36	42	17	2	1	0	2	1
	S	32	43	16	7	1	1	0	1
I: Instructors, S: Students; Numbers indicate the % of responses Numbers may not add up to 100% due to rounding									

6. Conclusions

The Challenge benefits students, instructors, client businesses and schools. Students gain practical, real-world online marketing experience complemented by the excitement of a global competition. They also get working knowledge of keyword marketing, a rapidly growing component in the advertising industry. Instructors get an effective teaching tool with full support materials, including access to an online community of fellow Challenge instructors for sharing their experiences (www.gomcha.com). Businesses get free online advertising and online marketing advice from students. Finally, schools get a dynamic learning opportunity for their students and goodwill with local businesses. Google will incorporate feedback from the various groups in the 2009 Google Online Marketing Challenge. In addition, Google has set up a Challenge Research Center for sharing articles, data sets and other teaching and learning materials

Reference

(www.google.com/onlinechallenge/research/).

*The site will be online in late 2008 or early 2009. A provisional version is at:
<http://web.biz.uwa.edu.au/units/450502/research/research.html>